

Solid waste expert works up a storm

By RALPH R. ECHTINAW
STAFF WRITER

Smith is your typical workaholic, well-recommended, competent, doesn't sprint to the parking lot at quitting time and occasionally sleeps overnight in the office.

Smith, who serves Oakland County taxpayers as waste management director, admits to working 60-65 hours in a typical week. Last Monday he didn't leave work until 9 p.m. or so, then drove 30 some miles home to Livonia and hurried back to Pontiac the first thing in the morning.

Southfield Mayor Don Fracassi said Smith was the same way when he worked for the city. "He really would not pay attention to five o'clock," Fracassi said.

Smith's former secretary in Southfield, Chris Weinhau, said the boss once spent the night bundled up in a sleeping bag in the office because a heavy snowfall was predicted overnight. "He kept me real busy and real challenged," Weinhau said. "I enjoyed working for him thoroughly. He's a good man."

In Oakland County government, Smith, 65, is the resident solid waste expert. His job is to see that the county complies with all state and federal regulations regarding disposal and recycling of garbage. "What it all boils down to is, 'Where are you going to bury it?'" he said.

It used to be that they talked about trash incinerators for Oakland County, and that's how Smith came to be offered his current job.

As public services director for Southfield city government in the late 1980s, Smith vigorously opposed a county solid waste plan that called for way more incinerator capacity than the county could possibly use.

"At the south end, we were saying, 'Wait a minute! The whole waste stream isn't that big. You don't need to build that kind of incinerator capacity,'" Smith remembers.

As it happened, said Jim Brennan, a county commission staff member, Smith so impressed county officials with his opposition to their plan that they offered him a job assembling an alternate plan.

"(Smith) had not only a handle on what should be done, but some of the best data banks I've ever seen," Brennan said. "You name it, he had the information or knew how to put it together."

Former county commission chairman Roy Rewold, working with then-County Executive Dan Murphy, hired Smith in 1989. "I was never sorry we were able to get him from Southfield," Rewold said. "He's a great man. He works 24 hours a day. He'd be there (in the office) on Saturdays and Sundays even."

Fracassi was sorry to see Smith leave Southfield. "When he left to go to the county, it was hard to take," the mayor said. "He's a very, very well-qualified individual."

Smith had spent 18 years working for Southfield in several different jobs. His original specialty was traffic engineering, a field he



Roger Smith

pioneered in Southfield as that city's first full-time traffic engineer in 1970.

In the 1960s, he worked for a traffic consulting firm and the Michigan Department of Transportation. Along the way he helped decide where several area freeways would be built, including I-96, I-275 and I-696.

He settled in Livonia with wife, Judith, long ago, in part because he wanted to live in a spot with easy access to a freeway and he knew I-96 was going in there.

Nowadays Smith is working under a deadline to get an amendment to a new solid waste plan drawn up before the end of the year, so he hasn't the luxury for hobbies.

His Astro van, modified to serve as a mobile fly fishing headquarters, just takes him to and from work for now. He hasn't built and flown a wire guided model airplane in years, but still maintains his membership in the American Modelers Association and reads the magazines.

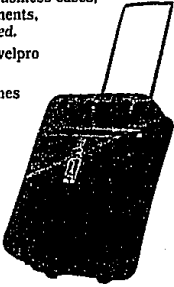
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